

Romans and Trojans in Vergil's *Aeneid*

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Book 3 of the *Aeneid* describes the wanderings of Aeneas and his Trojan followers as they flee Troy in search of a goal they have as yet only inadequately understood. One of the first stops on the journey takes the Trojans to the floating island of Delos. Here Aeneas prays for guidance to the tutelary deity of the island, Apollo, and asks where his people may finally find a home. The advice granted by the god induces the Trojans to make an intriguing mistake, one with serious implications for their conception of national identity and, by extension, for the identity of the Rome they must found.

The reply of Apollo is couched in the oracular ambiguities characteristic of the deity:

Hard sons of Dardanus, the land which first bore you from the stock of your ancestors will receive you as you return in her rich bosom. Look for your ancient mother. Here the house of Aeneas and the sons of your sons and the sons born from them will rule over every shore.

Apollo's words admit of two interpretations. The clue as to what finally turns out to be the correct answer is found in the very first phrase: the reference to the Trojans as the 'sons of Dardanus' describes them all as the offspring of the mythical founder of their city and alludes to the very first origin of Dardanus and therefore of Troy, Italy. The adjective 'hard' points to the qualities with which the peoples of Italy and the West are associated throughout the *Aeneid*. Yet when the Trojans turn to Anchises, father of Aeneas, a quite different solution is proposed: the ancient mother of the Trojans is the goddess Cybele, the Great Mother. Cybele moved from Mount Ida on Crete to its namesake near Troy; and so the Trojans must make for Crete.

Cricket and ale

There are grave hazards in writing a national foundation myth: the antiquarian investigation of 'where we come from' can turn too easily into a prescription for 'what we should be about'. Whenever someone tells me that Britain began with village greens, maypoles, cricket, and ale, I wonder whether that person does not wish that that was all that we were about, that lurking in the background there may not be a list of things which that person would sooner exclude than endeavour to understand. It is therefore heartening that Vergil's mythological founders of Rome should perceive themselves as descending from and having

at the heart of their culture none other than the Great Mother herself. For, far from the self-confidently Western, hard and masculine primitivism of Italy, these Trojans associate themselves with an ecstatic Eastern cult ministered by flamboyantly dressed, self-castrating priests. What does this imply?

At various points in the *Aeneid* Vergil describes the impact made by his Trojan travellers on the different lands which they visit. In Book 4, the North African King Iarbas, furious at the affair between Dido and Aeneas, complains of 'that Paris with his half-male cohort, tying up his chin and his oil-sleeked hair with a Maeonian bonnet', while in Book 9 the Italian warrior Numanus Remulus inveighs against the 'twice-captured Phrygians' and taunts them as effeminates:

*... You, in your dresses embroidered with yellow and loud purple,
you with the hearts of loafers, you devotees of dancing,
with frilly sleeves to your tunics, and bonnets kept on by ribbons! –
you Phrygian women (for Phrygian men you are not), run away
to Mount Didymus, where the double-mouthed pipe tweedles for addicts!
The timbrels and Berecynthian fife of Cybele call you.
Leave fighting to men, I advise you; relinquish sword-play to others.*

Numanus is summarily despatched by a single arrow from Ascanius. These Trojans are never simply the soft Phrygian of their opponents' imagining. Yet Numanus and Iarbas point to the same qualities in the people of Aeneas which the Trojans perceive in themselves when they make for Cybele.

The death of Troy

The *Aeneid* is a poem of exile, of a Mediterranean world where peoples leave their fatherland and struggle to make a home for themselves on strange and hostile shores. The principal ally of Aeneas and the first person to settle the future site of Rome is Evander the Arcadian. When Evander meets Aeneas his memories of his early encounter with Anchises are the exile's classic bid to invent kinship relations with a stranger who will become a friend. When Aeneas and his Trojans meet the Italians, the incompatibility of the two races is evoked in the cultural polemics of men like Numanus. The only way in which peace can finally be imposed is for Jupiter to accept the conditions of Juno in Book 12 and permit the total disappearance of the culture of Troy:

*When they make peace through a prosperous – aye, let it be so – a prosperous
marriage, and when they are making agreements and laws to unite them,
do not command the indigenous Latins to change their ancient
name, to become Trojans and to be called Teucrians:*

*allow them to keep the old language and their traditional dress:
let it be Latium for ever, and the kings be Alban kings;
let the line be Roman, the qualities making it great be Italian.
Troy's gone; may it be gone in name as well as reality.*

What Juno prays for at the very climax of *the Aeneid* is enacted throughout the Iliadic struggles of the final four books of the poem – the eradication of all that is typical of the culture of Troy. Numanus Remulus accuses the Trojans of dressing in purple and yellow. In Book 4 of the *Aeneid*, Mercury comes down to Carthage to find Aeneas laying the foundations for the city of Dido and decked out in a purple cloak which Dido has embroidered for him with gold thread. The Tyrian purple used by Dido is typical of her culture but the embroidery is pure Trojan – the Latin for a couturier or embroiderer is *phrugio* and Vergil's ancient commentator Servius never misses this resonance in the dress sense of his Phrygians. It is a taste in clothes which Aeneas never loses – at the start of Book 11 he buries his beloved Pallas in Dido's cloak of purple and gold – but it is one which the Italians will destroy. A moment of immense symbolic significance for the destruction of Trojan culture must be Vergil's description in Book 11 of the outfit of Chloereus, the priest of Cybele later slain by Turnus:

*It befell that Chloereus, a one-time priest in the service of Cybele,
showed at a distance, the shining Phrygian armour conspicuous,
spurring his foam-flecked mount, which wore a horsecloth – a hide
armoured with scales of bronze, like plumage, and buckled with gold.
Chloereus himself, resplendent in dusky, exotic purple
was shooting Cretan arrows from a bow of Lycian make:
golden the bow this warrior carried, and gold the helmet
he wore; his mantle was made of linen, a saffron colour,
and a red-gold brooch held fastened its rustling folds; his tunic
and oriental trews were embroidered with golden thread.*

Worthy of Maecenas?

Does Vergil see it as a mark of Rome's virtue that his country should publicly put this Trojan identity behind it? Or does he perceive the impoverishment of a culture so determined to deny all that is flamboyant, that is feminine about it? In the end, even martial, masculine Rome could not endure without Cybele and owed its survival at the height of the Punic wars to the introduction to the city of her cult. Throughout its history, Rome found it periodically expedient to set itself against all that was oriental, to retreat to a misogynistic primitivism. In Vergil's own life, in the Actium campaign against Antony and Cleopatra, Augustus had done just this. Yet the *Aeneid* tells a more complicated story, one where the rough Italian has his share of honour alongside the sleek Phrygian, where Rome's ancestry, her core

character, is a compound of the two. Whatever the ideology propounded by the regime there were always people at Rome who could see value in cultural diversity. Among these must be counted Vergil. With him too must stand his patron Maecenas, right-hand-man to Augustus, but lampooned by Seneca for his outrageous effeminacy and affected dress. When Juvenal needs an epithet to describe the luxury of a shipment of purple material lost at sea, he says that it was worthy of Maecenas.

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